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ABSTRACT

Australian studies show that television assists in the socialization of immigrants, changing and shaping their self-images and perceptions of reality and fostering their interpersonal communication skills. Studies conducted to evaluate the introduction of television have found that television helps in the vocabulary development of young children. Comparisons of "Sesame Street" with the Australian program "Playschool" suggest, among other findings, that "Playschool" is more appropriately designed for four-year-olds than is "Sesame Street" and increases oral competence in a much more generalized way than does "Sesame Street," that "Playschool" encourages oral responses from children, and that the success of "Playschool" may stem from its promotion of associative learning of word meanings. Other studies suggest that television can provide children with a shared symbolic structure, thus facilitating interpersonal communication. A study of the uses and gratifications provided by the television program "Happy Days" suggests a number of conclusions, among them that adolescents watch the show so they can talk about it with others: that younger adolescents interact with the characters, making use of inner speech processes; that younger adolescents learn social skills and assertiveness from the program; and that the majority of adolescents respond to--rather than identify with--the program's characters. (GT)

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Television and Oracy: A psychological viewpoint

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RATIONALE

When I accepted Bill Crocker's invitation to present a paper to your conference, I wrote that "I had not examined the relationship between media use and oracy" and that I would have to "leave it to the distinguished audience to extrapolate my conclusions to the development of oracy". I hope you will so be able. The main thrust of my paper will be in the way television in Australia assists in the socialisation of newer migrants - especially in the ways their self-image changes and is shaped; and their perception of reality. It seems to me self evident that self-image is related to oracy if only as far as intrapersonal communication is concerned. I would judge that perceptions of reality should in part determine interpersonal communication. But before I address these issues I will present some data which reveals how television affects speech.

TELEVISION AND SPEECH

The studies conducted to evaluate the introduction of television found that the new medium helped young children to a larger vocabulary. Thus Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) found that first grade children in teletown were one year advanced in vocabulary compared to radiotown, and that children of lower intelligence benefited most. On the cautionary side, however, such benefits were not evident at either the sixth or tenth grades. Television, it appears, provides only a head start.

SESAME STREET

More recently much interest has focussed on the ability of curriculum designed programmes such as Sesame Street in assisting children in oracy. Sesame Street sets out, according to Lesser (1974), to teach children to "recognise such basic symbols as letters"; "given a verbal label for certain letters the child can select the appropriate letter from a set of printed letters" and of course "recite the alphabet". Equally the goals of Sesame Street include some material more germane to oracy such as "matching words on the basis of rhyming" and "associate given sounds with familiar objects or animals". Just how successful Sesame Street has been in achieving its goals remains contentious. When Cook et al (1975) reanalysed Bogart and Ball's (1972) original data, they concluded that the effects of viewing Sesame Street itself were slight; the greatest gains apparently only appearing for recognition of numbers and letters rather than learning and using new words. What does seem apparent from the evaluative studies is that (1) parental encouragement is far more important than mere viewing in increasing oral competence and specifically (2) according to Minton (1972) Sesame Street produces gains only for advantaged children. In other words far from the original goal of bringing disadvantaged children up to the standard of advantaged children, Sesame Street merely increases the gap between such children before they go to school. It appears oral competence remains the preserve of the parent rather than of instructional media like Sesame Street. We may be confident of these findings since the results from

an extensive evaluation in Mexico (Diaz-Guerrero et al (1976)) show a similar pattern. Thus in spite of what these authors see as a "cultural assault" in a Latin American context, viewing Plazo Sesamo did result in better vocabulary and letter recognition. But why should televiewing, whether Sesame Street which is purportedly designed to increase vocabulary, or the more general run of programming sampled by Schramm et al, increase vocabulary? What are the processes by which children learn new words when watching television? While I shall return to this question again in this paper, detailed examination of Australian Playschool may give us some clues.

AUSTRALIAN PLAYSCHOOL

I shall have to leave it to this audience to discover why I think Australian Playschool, which I have here on videocassette, is more appropriately designed for a four-year audience than is Sesame Street (Noble and Duck (1979)). While Playschool has not been researched to anything approaching the same degree as Sesame Street, here in Australia it appears (Ashby (1971)) that Playschool holds children's attention more sustainedly over time, and more importantly gives rise to more program related activity after viewing, than does Sesame Street. This may account for the comparative failure of Sesame Street in achieving its goals. Were Playschool to be subjected to the same degree of research effort, which I am hoping to do shortly, I think we would find that it does increase oral competence in a much more generalized way than Sesame Street. Certainly Playschool's mailbag indicates that it is particularly successful in reaching children with a variety of handicaps - and not least to quote from one typical letter from a migrant teacher "Many of the words you introduce so attractively are as necessary to new arrivals whatever their ages (especially to low achievers in their own languages) as they are to your audience of pre-schoolers".

Another letter tells us how children come to better command the English language from Playschool. "She is an only child and we live in an isolated area - she talks to John and the others on Playschool . . . . " (my italics). We see in clear focus how this three year-old girl develops oral competence - she talks back at the regularly appearing presenters. This process was recognised some twenty years ago by Horton and Wohl (1956) who maintained that comperes (their term personnas) created an "illusion of intimacy" with the audience. Audiences feel that they know these characters and respond to them (their term para-social interaction). Yet even para-social interaction is a communicative process whereby audiences not only exercise their existing oral skills but also build onto them those words and concepts which constitute the mass culture that television relays. I feel confident in making what the Irish would call such a "bold" statement since Goldsen and Bibliowiez (1976), in their report of the planning for the Spanish language version of Sesame Street, argue that ". . . there is no such thing as an acultural language. Language doesn't deliver culture. Language is culture". Thus in the case of immigrant children in Australia, Playschool is both socialising and an aculturalising agent.

SESAME STREET VERSUS PLAYSCHOOL

In stark contrast to the initial frenzied pace of Sesame Street, since slowed down at least twice, and which Ashby reports children reacted against, Playschool is gentler, more integrated and aims to teach those concepts which words underpin - rather than rote recitation of the alphabet.

Thus according to Allan Kendall (1978), executive producer, the four year-old "does not visualise very well yet. Long flows of words are difficult. Where words can be 'lived out' (the odd gesture, facial expression) we do it". Likewise, often in complete contrast to Sesame Street words and the objects to which they refer are always shown simultaneously - the same applies to concepts. All this is achieved within an integrated sequence which is often revised five times before it goes to air. The whole program is knitted together in a way which makes Sesame Street look like a mosaic thrown together by unrelated masons - which in reality it is.

ASSOCIATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Whether the Playschool producers are aware of the analogy, Playschool remains a classic example of what Vygotsky (1962) calls a chain complex; he writes "a dynamic, consecutive joining of individual links into a single chain, with meaning carried over from one link to the next". In their attempt to construct the total "gestalt" of the programme, the linkage between items is in terms of a single common attribute. But whereas the chain complex, according to Vygotsky "does not rise above its elements as does a concept", Playschool employs this technique merely to link items. They refer back at every opportune moment to their central theme or concept. It is Vygotsky's point that young children think in complexes not concepts, and accounts inter alia for "the peculiar phenomenon that one word may in different situations have different or even opposite meanings as long as there is some associative link between them" (as occurred in some ancient languages).

Just how salient such associative learning of word meanings remains is illustrated by two examples of associative "mislearning" from Sesame Street. Noble and Duck (1979) showed children a Sesame Street sponsored by the letter Q. Four-year-olds watched ants laboriously carry a letter Q to the top of a hill. When later asked what words begin with the letter Q, the answer naturally enough guided by chain complex associations, was hill. Likewise after watching Grover acting as a waiter in the restaurant stressing the concepts all or none, one four-year-old in answer to the question "What is 'all'?", replied one - because only milk was finally available on the menu. One presumes such "errors" are manifold and account for the lack of gains in some achievement tests. Yet within the four-year-old chain complex frame of reference these answers are not only intelligible, but as far as he is concerned, quite correct.

Clearly however it is to the credit of Playschool and to the discredit of Sesame Street, that the structure of the programme is at the child's complex level. Hence communication between Playschool and the child is possible since "complexes corresponding to word meanings are not spontaneously developed by the child: The lines along which a complex develops are predetermined by the meaning a given word already has in the language of adults . . . The adult cannot pass on to the child his mode of thinking. He merely supplies the ready-made meaning of a word, around which the child forms a complex - with all the structural, functional, and genetic peculiarities of thinking in complexes".

We may in fact have here the reason why Sesame Street fails to develop oral competence and why I hypothesise at least that Playschool is successful. Television at its best employs complexes in order to link together disparate program items, which in turn lead the child towards

stable word meanings as comprehended by adults. Television at its worst becomes merely a noisy collage which does not help children develop oral competence. And researchwise at least we should note that the "whole" is far greater than the sum of its parts for the reasons I hope I have made clear.

TELEVISION PROVIDES A COMMON SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE

While this paper runs the danger of becoming a complex rather than a concept, Vygotsky's observations enable us to refocus on the role of the television in developing oral competence. If younger children use words in complex rather than concept form, communication between young children becomes very difficult. Yet we find television can provide children with a shared symbolic structure, providing they have watched the same programs. Gomberg (1961) found television inspired play evident amongst 80 per cent of 56 four-year-old boys, and overall amongst 50 per cent of her four-year-old sample. Gomberg found children practising roles as varied as spectators at a television show and television weather man as well as Lone Ranger, Sheriff, Superman and Tonto. She noted that whenever a television symbol was used, the play took on a stereotyped character. The children used their equipment in a set and stereotyped way, they walked and ran in a set manner and their phrases were replicas of characters seen. Gomberg comments, "whatever their background, there was, because of television, a communality to their play". In other words because of televiewing children can play together because they share both a common symbolic structure and a common set of chain complex associations.

INNER SPEECH

We may observe similar processes at work as far as older children are concerned. While children replace complexes with concepts in interpersonal speech by about six/seven years, I remain convinced that intrapersonal speech remains of a "complex" nature. In this context Vygotsky is again revealing. He argues that our intrapersonal language, in marked contrast to our interpersonal language, becomes progressively more and more abbreviated. He concludes that a "word is a microcosm of human consciousness". In what he calls inner speech, "a single word is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in external speech". Inner speech for Vygotsky represents the continuous development of egocentric speech of childhood which has gone underground retaining its chain complex nature. It is doubly important therefore that television programming for young children accommodates itself to their associative thought patterns since it is the precursor of inner speech in later life.

TRUNCATED SPEECH CODES

Bernstein (1970), who admits his debt to Vygotsky, reconceptualises his ideas at an interpersonal communication level. Where two or more people share the same experience, a truncated speech code, which he calls "restricted" is all that is necessary as with "inner speech". Where two or more strangers meet an elaborated code is needed which takes nothing for granted. We may hypothesise that television in providing the communal symbols of a common culture facilitates the use of truncated codes in interpersonal speech. While some would throw up their hands in horror at such an occurrence, I welcome it since it implies that greater communication possibilities exist than before the advent of the common culture of television.

In a survey (Noble and Noble (1978)) of the "uses and gratifications"

found by 136 adolescents aged from eleven to seventeen years for the popular TV show Happy Days in 1976, the most important use was the "coin of exchange" function. By this I mean adolescents watched the show so that they could talk about it with others, I deduce in a truncated code, because they shared the programme experience. Amongst their peer groups Happy Days was discussed at least once a week by half of the sample. Indeed four out of ten talked about the show this often with their parents, indicating that Happy Days is a common focus amongst teenagers and between teenagers and parents. It should be noted in passing that only ten per cent talked about the program this frequently with schoolteachers - underscoring once again that the education system does not build on experience within the teenage repertoire.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS PROVIDED BY HAPPY DAYS

The goal of this study was to take a show known to be popular with adolescents and examine what it was they gained from watching it. As was the case with Playschool it was apparent that the regularly appearing characters had created an illusion of intimacy with their audience. No less than three quarters of the adolescents surveyed in 1976 watched at least every other Happy Days show. Likewise not less than seven out of ten said they would say hello to Fonzie, Richie, Howard, Marion, Potsie, Ralph and Jonie in the street - as indeed the actors who play these roles maintain. Characters who did not appear regularly did not create an illusion of intimacy.

Responding to TV characters

When characters are recognised on this scale, adolescents are likely to respond to them, by playing opposite them and interacting with them. In this respect results showed that half the adolescents surveyed said they would like to be either Fonzie's girlfriend or Gloria's (Fonzie's girl at the time) boyfriend - namely responding roles. Responding to such characters has major, and as yet unexplored, consequences in terms of oracy. While viewers may practice answering roles already within their behavioural repertoire; equally they may enact novel roles when responding to recognised characters. Since responding is mainly covert rather than overt, one presumes the inner speech mode is exercised when watching programs like Happy Days.

Reality-fantasy confusion

Recognising and playing opposite regularly appearing characters results in a confusion between the reality and fantasy of what has been seen. While adolescents knew the program originated in America and was set in the 1950s, nevertheless half the sample said the show was true to life rather than acted as in a school play. One can understand why wreaths and wedding presents flood in when a fictional death or marriage occurs in a serial program. Believing the program to be "real" increases the probability of responding to characters, and make their screen activities salient topics for interpersonal communication. As I have argued elsewhere (Noble (1975)) screen characters in TV serials become almost an extended family for, in this case, a multi-national audience. Adolescents the world over can talk about the antics of these characters, just as the activities of extended family members are fair game conversation-wise in more intimate communities. (The word gossip being derived from "Godsibb" or "related to each other under God".)

Indeed we found practically all the adolescents sampled had compared their own parents with the Cunninghams in the show. The consensus view was that their parents were considerably stricter. The implication again being that mass media provide focal stimuli for interpersonal communication. Equally as far as inner speech is concerned sampled teenagers demonstrated that they had thought about characters' relatives who had not at the time been seen before camera. Three quarters of those who completed questionnaires were able to describe Fonzie's parents, mainly as incapable or from a typical Italian family where they "spoil the boys, and let them walk all over them".

Anticipatory socialisation

The central hypothesis we ran through the data concerned anticipatory socialisation. Hyman (1974) in a benchmark article argues that the mass media is a powerful socialisation agent - namely makes people fit to live in society by being sensitive to the co-existence and demands of others. Thus by interacting with the regularly appearing people in Happy Days younger adolescents engage in what Hyman calls "imaginative sociability", once again exercising inner speech, in order to practise those social roles which they will have to enact in the future. No less than two thirds of the total sample said they had very often or often learnt to be cool, where to go with friends, how to ask for a date, how to get on with parents, and how to be themselves. At the other end of the continuum, which in part establishes that results are no mere artifact, only one in five said the show has shown them how to do well at school work.

Results indicated that it was the younger, rather than the older, adolescent who said they had learnt how to relate to the peer group and how to be assertive from Happy Days. In fact younger adolescents replied often to twelve of the twenty social learning skills surveyed. These results illustrate the same process which was at work some thirty years ago when Herzog (1944) reported that half the female audience for daily radio serials took advice from the programs. In other words we should not let the title mass delude us that communication does not take place. Communication, moreover, which audiences apply in their everyday life situation with all the consequences for oracy that follow.

Identification or recognition?

By now I hope the central thrust of my argument is clear. It is that audiences do not identify with television characters, that is lose their individual identities and put themselves in the shoes of those characters. Rather it is that viewers recognise the characters, a process involving no loss of individual identity, and respond to them. One final set of findings from the Happy Days study hopefully illustrates this point. Employing repertory grid methodology we asked teenagers to assess themselves now and themselves in three years time, the ways their parents and friends saw them and to assess the Happy Days characters. By comparing self percept with these other percepts we were able to establish if adolescents were modeling themselves on Happy Days characters. Results showed that adolescents perceived real life people, for current self parents first followed by friends, and for self in three years time friends followed by parents, as more important than Happy Days celebrities. Equally important current self was seen as most like Jonie, with Richie, Ralph and Potsie second, third, and fourth in that order. Three years on teenagers

thought they would be like Richie, Ralph and Fonzie - in that order. Hence it appears that adolescents get into the show not by identifying with the star, but rather with one of the many foils who enhance Fonzie's performance. Likewise compared to adolescents born in Australia, adolescents from abroad saw their current selves as more like Jonie and self three years on as more like Ralph and Potsie - in other words the foil characters rather than the stars. As might be expected immigrants saw themselves as less like the ways both friends and parents see them relative to those born in Australia.

These results strongly suggest that immigrants, being outside the mainstream of Australian culture, respond to rather than identify with the stars of Happy Days. Further results suggest that they learn appropriate responses to the stars by taking cues from foil characters.

The repertory grid measure appears to be valid since those younger adolescent boys who said they had done some of the cool things Fonzie had done, were precisely those who saw themselves, both now and in the future, as similar to Fonzie. Importantly though Fonz had not created an "illusion of intimacy" with his imitators, although his girlfriend had. It seems that his imitators had become involved in the show by putting themselves into Fonzie's shoes and in so doing had played opposite his girlfriend - which is as predicted by Noble (1975). We were also able to establish the motive for such identification. Those boys who lost their identities to become, and subsequently imitate Fonzie were precisely those who did not see themselves as their parents saw them. Given the conflict between parental demands and their image of self, I submit that they chose to escape from this burden by submerging their identities to put themselves in Fonzie's shoes.

Adolescents who use the mass media in an identity loss mode are unlikely to develop oracy skills. They merely accommodate themselves to the television celebrity and become like Gomberg's children stereotypes of what they have seen. The majority on the other hand who interact with television performers do not lose their identities and assimilate those responsive roles practised when viewing into their life experiences. The majority are engaged by the characters and respond to them via inner speech. And as Vygotsky pointed out inner speech for oneself is the shorthand repository of our life experiences; the word mnemonics found there are the basis of consciousness itself.

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